



Italy

La Dolce Vita

By Paula Giangreco Cullison

Whether you are drawn to Italy to experience the antiquities of Rome, the Renaissance art of Florence, the exuberance of Venice, the tranquility of the Lake Districts, or the majesty of the Dolomites, Italy's sweet life is certain to take hold of you.

And so it was the case for me and my family as we spent a month discovering the Italian way. In spite of the hectic pace of the 21st Century, Italians in both large and small cities have managed to hold on to their charming lifestyle. Good food coupled with fine wine, family and friends and a long mid-day nap are the key ingredients for a perfect day. It is quite common to see three or four generations of a family taking a stroll (*passagiate*) during the early evening hours.

Although traveling by train may seem stressful, and it can be, it is a practical way to explore Italy. This is especially true if you have any apprehensions about international driving. Trains are generally on time, and a first-class reservation gives assurance of a comfortable seat. Major cities have installed computerized ticket machines at the train stations; insert your credit card, make your destination and time selections, and off you go!

Bancomatic ATM machines can be found just about everywhere. I always like to have about \$300 on hand, as not every business accepts credit cards. Since traveler's cheques are not as popular as they have been, be sure to bring your debit and credit cards.

Rome is the quintessential Eternal City in as much as one can never tire of it. And amazing as it seems, there are times when the popular attractions like the Trevi Fountain, **Spanish Steps, Coliseum, Forum, Pantheon** and even **St. Peter's Basilica** are not so crowded. The city is taking tourist business more seriously. The municipal transit authority runs a double-decker tourist bus which stops at all of the popular sights with the usual hop-on-hop-off privileges. From the upper deck, one gets a bird's eye view of the magical city.



“The Italians live by the “f” factor ... family, food, friends, festivals, fine art and architecture, fashion, films and faith.”

➤ **Spanish Steps**
Piazza di Spagna
Rome, Italy

➤ **Coliseum**
Piazza del Colosseo
Rome, Italy
+39.06.700.4261

➤ **Forum**
Via dei Fori Imperiali
Rome, Italy
+39.06.699.0110

➤ **Pantheon**
Piazza della Rontonda
Rome, Italy
+39.06.6830.0230

➤ **St. Peter's Basilica**
Piazza San Pietro
Vatican City
Rome, Italy
+39.06.698.8166.2

➤ **Villa Borghese**
North of Rome center
Rome, Italy

➤ **Orvieto and Cività di Bagnoregio**
Viterbo, Lazio Region
Italy

➤ **The Duomo**
Piazza Duomo
Milan, Italy

➤ **The Baptistry**
Piazza dei Miracoli
Pisa, Italy
+39.05.3872.210/211

➤ **Campanile di Giotto**
Piazza Duomo
Florence, Italy
+39.055.230.2885

➤ **San Miniato**
Via del Monte alle Croci
Florence, Italy
+39.055.234.2731

➤ **Piazzale Michelangelo**
Plaza de Miguel Angel
Firenze, Italy
+39.055.276.8075

➤ **Accademia Gallery**
Via Ricasoli 58-60
Florence, Italy
+39.055.238.8609

➤ **Uffizi Gallery**
Loggiato degli Uffizi, 6
Florence, Italy
+39.055.294883

➤ **Basilica of Santa Croce**
Piazza Santa Croce 16
Florence, Italy
+39.055.244.619

➤ **Cortina d'Ampezzo**
The Dolomites
Belluno, Veneto, Italy





On this trip, I discovered the **Villa Borghese**, a green oasis that spans three miles in the heart of Rome. One of Europe's most elegant parks, Villa Borghese offers shaded trees, park benches, cafés, fine museums, bikes for rent, and a zoo. It was a pleasure to stroll here and see the Romans at play and relaxing.

Architecturally, Italy has not allowed the all-pervasive high rise mentality to negate its sense of being. Most new buildings do not exceed five stories. Restoration of buildings and art work continues at a steady pace throughout Italy.

Close by is the hilltop town of **Orvieto** with its magnificent cathedral. The old section of the city is accessible by funicular from the train station. For the ambitious, a bus trip to **Bagnoregio** and a walk to **Civita** is in order. This pedestrian hilltop town seems to be run by the octogenarians, most of whom are local women who own the vineyards.

Florence, the birthplace of the Renaissance and long ruled by the Medici family, was capital of the Kingdom of Italy from 1865-1870. Since then, it has been the capital of the Tuscan region. With the Arno River flowing through the city, Florence charms both its 400,000 inhabitants and international tourists alike.

The Duomo, Baptistery and Campanile are situated in the center of the old town and are magnets for visitors. Who can resist the lure of the brass doors, the mosaic work and stained glass wonderland of their windows, which

seem to peer right into one's very soul? One's religious persuasion matters not, as the profound awesomeness of these art and architectural masterpieces speaks to all.

A short ride on a local bus placed us at the church of **San Miniato** and **Piazzale Michelangelo** from where most photos overlooking the city are taken. In the midst of the piazza is another huge fountain with David as its focal point. Michelangelo's David is housed in the **Accademia gallery**, and Botticelli's Birth of Venus is at the **Uffizi**. Both galleries require reservations during the high tourist season.

The Basilica of Santa Croce, built in the 14th Century, is one of the largest churches in Florence. It houses the monumental and magnificent tombs of notable Italians like Michelangelo, Dante, Rossini, Galileo, and Machiavelli.

On this trip, we revisited the towns of the Cinque Terre located on the Ligurian Coast. Riomaggiore, Manrola, Corniglia, Vernazza and Monterosso are accessible by train, boat or foot. The foot path links all the towns; allow four to five hours for the hike. With the upsurge in popularity of the area in recent years, the Italian government has designated the region as a National Park. This means one must purchase a visitor's card to access the trails and ride the trains. Boat service is available several times a day. Stops are made at each one of the towns, enabling visitors to see all five villages in one day.

A few days in Desenzano at Lake Garda gave us a chance to relax. I like Garda, as it remains less touristy than the others in the northern Lake District. At 30 miles long and 10 miles wide, Garda is the largest of the Italian lakes in the region and a popular site for sailing and windsurfing. A boat ride to Sirmione with its Rocca Scaligera Castle, to Bardolino resplendent with vineyards, and then on to Riva will ensure a full day of enchantment.

We headed for Venice, our gateway to **Cortina d'Ampezzo** and the Dolomites. Since the bus leaves for Cortina only once a day at 7:50 a.m., we spent the night in a hotel, which was a renovated abbey. Its proximity to the train station was a bonus. We left our carry-on suitcases at the hotel and put a few changes of clothes in our over-the-shoulder bags. Off we went ... over the Scali, the largest foot bridge in Venice, and over two smaller bridges to Piazzale Rome to catch the bus to Cortina. The 3-1/2 hour bus ride, which passes through some charming towns and villages, was serene. The weather throughout the month of June was perfect and averaged about 78 degrees.

Cortina and the surrounding area of Alto Adige was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until WWI when it was ceded to Italy. Many inhabitants speak German in this region, also known as the southern Tyrol. Cortina, an internationally acclaimed skier's paradise, hosted the

Winter Olympics in 1956. Surrounded by mountain vistas, we were continuously in awe. The majesty of it all was breathtaking. The bus ride to the northern Tyrolean town of Dobbiaco allowed the Dolomites to enfold us in loving arms. On another day in Cortina, we took the Funavia Faloria gondola ride that climbed steadily up the mountainside. From there, we enjoyed sweeping mountain views across the Cortina basin to the Tofane Massif and with Mount Cristallo looming directly in front of us. The Cinque Torri rock formation, a sight we will always remember, seemed to change its mood with the setting sun.

We returned to Venice by bus and train, since the direct-return bus departs once a day at 3:20 p.m. and we wanted to arrive in Venice by mid-day. We arrived in Venice, one of the most unusual cities in the world. Venice is an architectural paradise on water. Each building along the Grand Canal is beautifully designed and photographable. Vaporettos, water taxis, barges, ambulances, police boats and gondolas create an interesting traffic pattern. The Moorish influence is evidenced in much of the architecture. Being in Venice is a step back in time, just like being in the midst of a scene from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. The large plaza areas, known as *campos*, are the centers of life for the various neighborhoods, such as the Dosodoro and Canneregio districts. Venice is one of the most romantic cities in the world ... where "O Sole Mio" meets *la dolce vita*.

Like most vacations, our month-long trip ended all too quickly. As we departed from the Venice airport, it occurred to me that the Italians live by the "f" factor ... family, food, friends, festivals, fine art and architecture, fashion (Ferragamo), films (Fellini), and faith. And so, we had to bid a fond farewell. Ciao, la Bella Italia! ■



Paula G. Cullison

"Italy: La Dolce Vita"

Paula spent the first phase of her life in what she calls a "New York state of mind." The second phase was filled with a variety of careers, child rearing, hiking, the formation of the Arizona Women's Partnership, inc. and its FUNdraiser – Wine, Women & Jazz. Now, the focus is on a vibrant and constant thread: her passion for international travel adventures and writing about them. Cullison has traveled to 34 countries (and to Italy six times). Her goal is to instill in others the love of travel. You can reach her at paulacullison@aol.com.

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8541 E. Anderson Dr., Suite 103 Scottsdale, AZ 85255
 T 480.443.7750 F 480.443.7751 www.lpimultimedia.com